

Gaining Consensus Among Stakeholders Through the Nominal Group Technique

This brief discusses the definition of nominal group technique; how to prepare for it; the four-step process to conduct it; when to use it; and the disadvantages and advantages of its use.

Defining the Nominal Group Technique

Nominal (meaning in name only) group technique (NGT) is a structured variation of a small-group discussion to reach consensus. NGT gathers information by asking individuals to respond to questions posed by a moderator, and then asking participants to prioritize the ideas or suggestions of all group members. The process prevents the domination of the discussion by a single person, encourages all group members to participate, and results in a set of prioritized solutions or recommendations that represent the group's preferences.

How to Prepare for NGT

The Meeting Room

Prepare a room large enough to accommodate five to nine participants. Organize the tables in a U-shape, with a flip chart at the open end of the U.

Supplies

Each U-shaped table set up will need a flip chart; a large felt-tip pen; masking tape; and paper, pencil, and 3" x 5" index cards for each participant.

Opening Statement

This statement clarifies member roles and group objectives, and should include: a warm welcome, a statement of the importance of the task, a mention of the importance of each member's contribution, and an indication of how the group's output will be used. (For an example of a good opening statement, see <http://instruction.bus.wisc.edu/obdemo/readings/ngt.html>).

The Four Step Process to Conduct NGT

- 1. Generating Ideas:** The moderator presents the question or problem to the group in written form and reads the question to the group. The moderator directs everyone to write ideas in brief phrases or statements and to work silently and independently. Each person silently generates ideas and writes them down.
- 2. Recording Ideas:** Group members engage in a round-robin feedback session to concisely record each idea (without debate at this point). The moderator writes an idea from a group member on a flip chart that is visible to the entire group, and proceeds to ask for another idea from the next group member, and so on. There is no need to repeat ideas; however, if group members believe that an idea provides a different emphasis or variation, feel free to include it. Proceed until all members' ideas have been documented.
- 3. Discussing Ideas:** Each recorded idea is then discussed to determine clarity and importance. For each idea, the moderator asks, "Are there any questions or comments group members would like to make about the item?" This step provides an opportunity for members to express their understanding of the logic and the relative importance of the item. The creator of the idea need not feel obliged to clarify or explain the item; any member of the group can play that role.
- 4. Voting on Ideas:** Individuals vote privately to prioritize the ideas. The votes are tallied to identify the ideas that are rated highest by the group as a whole. The moderator establishes what criteria are used to prioritize the ideas. To start, each group member selects the five

most important items from the group list and writes one idea on each index card. Next, each member ranks the five ideas selected, with the most important receiving a rank of 5, and the least important receiving a rank of 1.

After members rank their responses in order of priority, the moderator creates a tally sheet on the flip chart with numbers down the left-hand side of the chart, which correspond to the ideas from the round-robin. The moderator collects all the cards from the participants and asks one group member to read the idea number and number of points allocated to each one, while the moderator records and then adds the scores on the tally sheet. The ideas that are the most highly rated by the group are the most favored group actions or ideas in response to the question posed by the moderator. (For an example of a ranking sheet and final tally table of an NGT session, see: <http://www.siliconfareast.com/ngt.htm>).

When to Use NGT

NGT is a good method to use to gain group consensus, for example, when various people (program staff, stakeholders, community residents, etc.) are involved in constructing a logic model and the list of outputs for a specific component is too long and therefore has to be prioritized. In this case, the questions to consider would be: “Which of the outputs listed are most important to achieving our goal and are easier to measure? Which of our outputs are less important to achieving our goal and are more difficult for us to measure?”

Disadvantages of NGT

- Requires preparation.
- Is regimented and lends itself only to a single-purpose, single-topic meeting.
- Minimizes discussion, and thus does not allow for the full development of ideas, and therefore can be a less stimulating group process than other techniques.

Advantages of NGT

- Generates a greater number of ideas than traditional group discussions.
- Balances the influence of individuals by limiting the power of opinion makers (particularly

advantageous for use with teenagers, where peer leaders may have an exaggerated effect over group decisions, or in meetings of collaboratives, where established leaders tend to dominate the discussion).

- Diminishes competition and pressure to conform, based on status within the group.
- Encourages participants to confront issues through constructive problem solving.
- Allows the group to prioritize ideas democratically.
- Typically provides a greater sense of closure than can be obtained through group discussion.

Resources

Dunham, Randall. *Nominal Group Technique: A User's Guide*. University of Wisconsin.
<http://instruction.bus.wisc.edu/obdemo/readings/ngt.html>. (Accessed 11/7/06)

Silicon Fareast. *Nominal Group Technique*.
<http://www.siliconfareast.com/ngt.htm>. (Accessed 11/7/06)

Sample, John. *Journal of Extension*. *Nominal Group Technique: An Alternative to Brainstorming*.
<http://www.joe.org/joe/1984march/iw2.html>. (Accessed 11/7/06)

Center for Rural Studies. *Guidelines for Using the Nominal Group Technique*.
<http://crs.uvm.edu/gopher/nerl/group/a/meet/Exercise7/b.html>. (Accessed 11/7/06)